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Review of Hayyim Pesah and Eli Yassif, *The Knight, the Demon and the Virgin: An Anthology of Hebrew Stories from the Middle Ages*

Abstract

In the currently charged world of Israeli public opinion, the publication of this book is a political act. The editors have crammed well known medieval Hebrew texts into a cheap, paperback format, using paper the acidity of which is more fitting for traditional "folk books" than for typical scholarly tomes designed for the library shelf. In this book readers will encounter the classics of Jewish folk literature--such as "The Story of the Jerusalemite," "Joseph Della Reina," and principle texts from Hebrew medieval romance literature such as "The Alexander Romance," a selection of "Tales of Sendebat," and a "Hebrew Arthurian Romance." A few texts such as "The Story of a Rich Man and a Beautiful Woman" and "The Defamed Innocent Woman" come from the famous manuscript OR. 135 in the Bodleian Library of Oxford--a manuscript Eli Yassif continues to study.

Disciplines

Cultural History | Folklore | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Political History

Comments

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In her introductory essay, Galit Hasan-Rokem establishes the theoretical framework for the issue, drawing upon recent trends in folklore, anthropology, semiotics, and history in Europe and America. The two articles by the Michel de Certeau and by Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, the only translated texts in this collection, assist her in fine-tuning her introduction of folklore scholarship to a broader readership by focusing on the study of everyday life. Her synthesis offers a new way to approach folklore and popular culture in Israel, conceptualizing the subject in terms of the emerging Israeli social reality and the discourse of post-modernism.

In his actions, research, and teaching, Dov Noy formulated the scholarly paradigm for folklore research in the post-independence era of Israel. This was an inherently modernist study of folklore that sought to record, document and preserve Jewish traditions (particularly narrative) at the initial point of inter-ethnic contact. Aware of the impending cultural disintegration of the immigrating Jewish communities, Dov Noy's goal was to reconstruct the historic narrative traditions as they were in their countries of origin, before the onset of the acculturation process into modern life and Zionist ideology.

Implicit in Galit Hasan-Rokem's synthesis is an approach that considers the present tradition not just as a reduction of the past, but also as an emergent, interactive, and interdependent set of social and cultural forces that are valid in their own right. This emergent tradition is constructed out of the fabric of everyday life in modern Israel. The political protest of Jewish women, "women in black," and the political behavior of Palestinians bring forward new symbols for the public domain. The collective memory that children's literature fostered in the pre-State and early-State periods clashes with the one that is represented in the "cassette music" of immigrants from countries under Islam. The researchers of culture themselves have become cultural agents who mediate between past and present for the communities they study. In addition to these cultural currents, voices from the ancient and medieval past resonate in a modern Israel in which the images of the film industry and the popular press have their visual impact on society. The additional contributors to this issue are: Yoram Bilu, Daniel Boyarin, Esther Cohen, Sarah

Hellman, Steve Kaplan, Ilana Pardes, Tamar Rapoport, Motti Regev, Ahmad Sa'di, Noam Yaron, and Yael Zerubavel.

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Hayyim Pesah and Eli Yassif, eds. *The Knight, the Demon and the Virgin: An Anthology of Hebrew Stories from the Middle Ages.* H. Pesah, "Foreword," pp. 7-9. Eli Yassif, "Postscript," pp.194-212. Jerusalem: Keter, 1998. Pp. 213 (In Hebrew).

In the currently charged world of Israeli public opinion, the publication of this book is a political act. The editors have crammed well known medieval Hebrew texts into a cheap, paperback format, using paper the acidity of which is more fitting for traditional "folk books" than for typical scholarly tomes designed for the library shelf. In this book readers will encounter the classics of Jewish folk literature—such as "The Story of the Jerusalemite," "Joseph Della Reina," and principle texts from Hebrew medieval romance literature such as "The Alexander Romance," a selection of "Tales of Sendebat," and a "Hebrew Arthurian Romance." A few texts such as "The Story of a Rich Man and a Beautiful Woman" and "The Defamed Innocent Woman" come from the famous manuscript OR. 135 in the Bodleian Library of Oxford—a manuscript Eli Yassif continues to study.

The importance of the collection is neither in the discovery of any new versions nor in the scholarly annotations of familiar stories. These annotations are brief, precise, and adequate for the present format. Rather, the message of the book is in its very publication, its timing, and its target readership. The transfer of these narratives from academic to popular readership aims at educating the public about the nature of historical Jewish society and literature and at extricating Jewish tradition from the prison-house of piety and religiosity. In the formative years of Jewish religious philosophy (at the time of Maimonides, Nachmanides, and other great interpreters of the Mishnah and the Talmuds), Jewish people had sex on their minds, and they desired each other and feared demons much as other peoples did, then and now. European culture and literature, to

which they were exposed, influenced them without affecting their Jewishness.

In their respective "Foreword" (by Pesah) and "Postscript" (by Yassif), the editors do not elaborate upon the implications of their present publication for our own historical period. Rather, in a straightforward way, they offer the necessary informative details about Jewish folk literature in the Middle Ages. Eli Yassif points out that it was Micha Joseph bin Gurion (Berdyczewski, 1865-1921) who introduced European Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals to the treasure trove of medieval Hebrew literature (see *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales*, 1976), and in doing so presented an alternative model for the Jewish tradition to that constructed by Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky in their *The Book of Legends (Sefer Ha-Aggadah)* [1908-1911; English translation 1992].

But Pesah and Yassif need not elaborate upon the implicit. By selecting these texts and presenting them as an integral part of Jewish society, they place before contemporary Jewish readers, to borrow a phrase from Barbara Tuchman, "a distant mirror." In doing so, they urge modern Israelis to free themselves from the straightjacket of fundamentalist religiosity that threatens their society and to broaden the scope of Jewish tradition. They argue against any reductionism of Judaism, demonstrating once more that the Jewish historical and literary experience stands in contradiction to the fundamentalist claims that have been made on its behalf. Without the fanfare of claims and manifestos, this collection of stories is a fine example of scholarly engagement in a current political struggle.

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Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage . Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Pp. xviii + 326, illustrations, notes, index.

Festivals, museum exhibitions, world's fairs, parades, shop windows, and graffiti are among the provocative images of display constituting the subject of this book. Often the products of folklorists and ethnographers who present their

subject, and thereby constitute their "objects of ethnography" that is, their social and political purposes, these forms of display rightly deserve interpretation as cultural productions. In this collection of essays on the cultural agency of display, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett brings her keen insights to bear on a variety of productions from Plymouth Plantation to Ellis Island, the Museum of New Zealand to the Museum for African Art, the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife to the Los Angeles Festival. Readers of *JFER* should be familiar already with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's gifts for folkloristic and ethnographic inquiry into Jewish life, and in this collection she cuts a wide swath with her concern generally for "vernacular culture and the aesthetics of everyday life, both lived and exhibited" (p. 2; emphasis added). Jewish subjects compose a small portion of the book: a lone chapter on Jewish exhibitions at world's fairs and a small part of a chapter on her experience "staging Jews" at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. There is also a sense in which her grand task ranging beyond Jewish topics is, in fact, informed by her Jewish scholarship—concerns for "distinctions between doing and showing, demonstrating and performing" (p. 4). Issues of identity, particularly for marginalized groups, and the way meaning is constructed, perceived, and projected pervade the essays. She explores the diasporic "location of meaning at the destination rather than at the source, the vested nature of interest, and the foreignness of objects to their contexts of presentation" (p. 12). In an inquiry into relative, often competing systems of tradition, she finds questions of the ways that tastes and hierarchies are validated. She can cite the *Encyclopedia of Bad Taste* as a "golem let loose in a world of sno-globes and lava lamps, astroturf, shag rugs, and black velvet paintings" (p. 12). In her special attention to destination and identity she stands out among other works covering the cultural agency of display such as *Objects and Others*, edited by George W. Stocking, Jr. (1985), *Presenting the Past*, edited by Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (1986), *Remaking America* by John Bodnar (1992), and *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* by Mike Wallace (1996). While several of these sweeping titles cover the ways that immigrant and minority groups are represented in exhibitions and festivals, Jewish museology hardly rates a notice.